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ABSTRACT

The Odyssey Project is named for the Greek hero, Odysseus, who for 10 years, sought the purpose of life. The Project is based on the philosophy that a new generation of American schools must be viewed as a lifelong quest for excellence. The project is one of 11 designs for schools funded by the New American Schools Development Corporation, a private corporation in the spirit of the America 2000 strategy. This overview recounts the program's development and describes its approach. Odyssey calls for a formal system of basic schooling for students aged 3 to 18, with a developmental prenatal to age 3 component. The project will use an outcome-based education model to focus on knowledge, skills, and outcomes. Upon exit, each student should be successful as (1) a communicator; (2) a collaborator; (3) a creative producer; (4) a critical thinker; and (5) a concerned and confident citizen. Performance outcomes are to be set for each level, with world class standards for evaluating graduates. There will be five levels of schooling in a year-round schedule. Community service, parent involvement, and expanded use of technology will be features of the project. Barriers and challenges to implementation are reviewed. A fact sheet is presented as an appendix. (SLD)

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The Odyssey Project: A Quest for School Design

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Homer's epic poem, " The Odyssey", recounts the wanderings of the Ithacan king, Odysseus in his quest for the purpose of life. The Odyssey Project is so named because it is based on the philosophy that a new generation of American schools must be viewed as a dynamic lifelong quest for ever changing standards of excellence.

This project is one of eleven designs for new American schools funded by the New American Schools Development Corporation, a private organization which was conceived in the national "America 2000" education strategy. It is located in the Gaston County School District in North Carolina. This presentation provides an overview of the elements and special features of the proposed design. It focuses on the project's quest to rebuild the culture in which schooling exists. Attention is given to the barriers and challenges which result from the uncertainty of change. Public relations materials included in this paper were developed by the Gaston County Design Team.

Events Leading to Odyssey

October, 1989 - President Bush and the nations 50 Governors met in a historic summit at the University of Virginia to discuss how America could improve education and, in turn, its economic competitiveness.

February, 1990 - The fifty Governors and the President unanimously established six national education goals for the nation to reach by the year 2000. These goals are:

- All children in America will start school ready to learn.
- The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
- American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
- U.S. students will be the first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
- Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a world economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

Another component of the America 2000 program established national models for public education in school systems throughout the nation. President Bush encouraged leaders from the private sector to donate funds to be used for this purpose. All of the programs to be developed were to move the nation closer to meeting the six national goals.

July, 1991 - A non-profit corporation was formed to accept contributions and a Board of Directors composed of some of America's most outstanding corporate leaders was appointed. The Board of Directors include: John Clendenin, Bell South; Ray Whitman, Eastman Kodak; James Jones, American Stock Exchange; Gerald Bailes, former Governor of Virginia; Louis Grestner, Jr., Nabisco; Frank Shrantz, the Boeing Corporation; Ann McLaughlin, former Secretary of Labor. These individuals, and others helped secure contributions from such corporations and organizations as Martin Marietta, IBM, Ford, AT&T, Chrysler, Exxon and the NFL.

September - November, 1991 - Meetings were held across America to explain how schools would be selected to develop these models of excellence. A team of Gaston County educators prepared one of the hundreds of grant applications that were submitted. Those team members were:

Joseph Miller, Director
Edwin L. West, Jr., Superintendent
Jane Buckner, Instructional Specialist in Early Childhood Education, Gaston County Schools
Leon Moretz, Director of Elementary Education, Gaston County Schools
Brenda Ratchford, Director of Middle School Education, Gaston County Schools
Don Ratchford, Director of Secondary School Education, Gaston County Schools
Melinda Ratchford, Director of Media and Technology, Gaston County Schools
Tim Rickman, Principal of Stanley Junior High School
Vivian Taylor, Director of Student Services, Gaston County Schools
Robert Tyndall, Dean of the School of Education, University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Elizabeth Willis, Instructional Specialist for Student Services, Gaston County Schools

These individuals began writing the project proposal in November, 1991 and completed the application in January, 1992.

February, 1992 - The Board of Education in workshop session received and discussed the project and officially voted to submit the project at the regular February meeting.

June, 1992 - Gaston County officials were invited to meet with representatives of the New American Schools Development Corporation to discuss the project proposal.

July 7, 1992 - Gaston County was named a finalist for the award.

July 9, 1992 - The award was made public. (Gaston County School District was one of approximately 700 proposals submitted, and one of 11 selected.)

July - September, 1992 - Negotiations were conducted regarding budget.

November, 1992 - The Gaston County Board of Education approved the contract.

Project Overview

The Odyssey Project describes a formal system of basic schooling for students ages 3 to 18 with a developmental prenatal to age 3 component. The project will use an outcome-based education model that focuses on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students should possess when they graduate from Odyssey learning centers. Five basic exit outcomes will provide the focus for the instructional program proposed by the project: (1) Communicator; (2) Collaborator; (3) Creative Producer; (4) Critical Thinker; (5) Concerned and Confident Citizen. Odyssey schools will subscribe to the theory of multiple intelligences and will seek to develop each student's unique talents. At each level of schooling diagnostic criteria and specific performance outcomes will be designed to address each of at least seven distinct intelligences.

Performance outcomes set for each level of Odyssey schooling will include substantive assessment of each student's mastery of English, social studies (including geography), science, and mathematics objectives. The curriculum in these areas will reflect an appropriate balance between learning concepts, acquiring information, and applying essential processes. Each Odyssey student will study a second language, music, art, drama, and kinesthetics at each level of schooling. The computer will be used as a basic tool for instruction and management in all the disciplines. The curriculum will emphasize critical thinking and problem solving, and students will examine relevant ethical issues and learn how to make sound choices. In all curriculum areas an emphasis will be placed on understanding global issues.

In addition to formulating and refining the exit outcomes set for Odyssey schools, a set of world class standards will be designed against which Odyssey graduates will be judged. The set of world class standards will include recommendations made by various learning societies that impact national and international curriculum standards. Also included in the standards will be recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education and information gleaned from top developmental programs in the U.S. and in non-U.S. countries.

In the five levels of schooling proposed by The Odyssey Project, traditional designations of grade levels will not be used, rather a Greek letter will designate an age range for learners who attend a particular center. "Alpha" will designate the pre-formal component of schooling for children ages 0 - 3; "Beta" will be the center for learners ages 3 - 6; "Gamma" for learners ages 7 - 10; "Delta" for learners ages 11 - 14; and "Odyssey" for learners ages 15 - 18. At all levels movement in and out of learning cadres will be determined by accomplishment of performance outcomes not by age, grade levels, or time frames.

All learning centers will have common characteristics. All will operate on a year round schedule. Four terms of ten-weeks each will comprise the learning year. Learners will attend each of the four terms for a total of 200 days each year. At the end of each term, a three-week mini-term will be provided. Learners who accomplish all performance outcomes during the regular ten-week term may attend enrichment or extension sessions or may take leave time from their schooling. Learners who do not accomplish all performance outcomes will attend a five to seven day mini-term that extends their learning time.

All centers will provide learners with high technology environments. Learners will leave Odyssey schooling technologically literate. A wide range of technologies will be used to enhance learning and manage instruction.

Centers will contract with many different agencies to provide health care, social services, wellness and other essential support programs. Many of the agencies will be housed at the centers. This interagency arrangement will provide holistic support services to learners and their families. Also, these agencies will work closely with each center's staff to establish and maintain a non-violent, drug-free learning environment.

All centers will use Paideia concepts as the primary instructional delivery system. The appropriateness of the three levels of instruction--didactic, coaching, and seminars--will be understood, properly balanced, and consistently used during basic schooling. At the four formal Odyssey levels--Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Odyssey--learners will stay with the same cadre of learners and facilitators for CORE learnings during their years at each center. During CORE-PLUS time learners from different cadres will work together.

At all centers virtually all non-instructional support services will be contracted. The major responsibility of center professional staff will be learning and other services will be managed and provided by outside agencies. For all students at all levels a Learning Support Center will be provided. Located in proximity to the information center, the LSC will play a key role in learners' accomplishment of performance outcomes.

At the three upper levels of Odyssey schooling, learners will be required to attend weekly learning seminars that address national and world citizenship ideals and values. These seminars will focus on multi-cultural issues that prepare learners for living in the global society of the twenty-first century.

At all levels of formal learning, community service will be an integral part of each learner's experience. By the time learners graduate from Odyssey Center, they will have performed at least 220 hours of quality community service time. Family involvement with their child's schooling will be a primary goal of The Odyssey Project. Family members will provide service hours at each Odyssey center and will attend a minimum number of progress conferences with center professionals each year their child attends the center.

Business and community partnerships will be an integral part of Odyssey schooling. A business-education consortium will be formed to determine the best approach to involving businesses in the basic schooling of Odyssey learners. Each center will have an instructional manager and a non-instructional manager. The instructional manager will be responsible for the instructional leadership of the center. The non-instructional manager's responsibilities will be similar to that of an operations manager.

The Odyssey Project not only breaks the mold of traditional schooling, but it also breaks the mold of traditional thinking about school governance. Constraints to implementing the project will be addressed within the host school system by helping

local board of education members understand the nature of the project and to adjust or waive constraining policies and regulations. At state-level, existing and pending legislation will be sought to enable the project's successful implementation. The project can be fully implemented without violating federal program regulations.

The Odyssey Project requires teacher training programs that are solution centered, with theory and practice integrated through classroom application. The training will be a joint effort of university instructors, school unit specialists, and consultants from public and private sectors. The most promising educational research and programs were incorporated into the Odyssey Project design. A synergistic adaptation of the best components of the research resulted from the design team's work.

The Uncertainty of Change: Barriers and Challenges

In summary, then, Odyssey is best teaching practices, training for teachers, year round school, voluntary early childhood programs, voluntary family services, limited multi-age grouping, extended time for learning, community service, family involvement, and expanded use of technology.

Despite the excellence and effectiveness of these educational practices, the lessons to be learned from the Odyssey Project are derived from the multifaceted, complex nature of change. The simultaneous implementation of an array of innovations in practices, policies, and procedures raises questions and concerns among the consumers of the reform. Change is a process fraught with uncertainty. It is a search for solutions, new meanings, new structures, and new systems. It is, in fact, a journey, an odyssey in the true sense.

The barriers faced by the Odyssey Project included:

- Legal aspects of state regulations, legislative mandates, and the demands of professional associations.
- Lack of a common language among the various publics.
- School and community awareness and support.
- Opposition from extremist and special interest groups.
- Lack of clarity in defining "world class" standards.

These challenges were approached and met with varying levels of success. For example, special legislation suspended state regulations for schools involved in the project. Efforts were also in progress for defining measurable standards and for building community awareness through a broad public relations program (see Appendix A: Facts About Odyssey Schools).

However, the key issues were primarily ownership and understanding. Opposition from very vocal, militant special interest groups undermined the well-designed public

relations effort by focusing on distorted definitions of innovative practices in the design. For example, critical thinking was interpreted as learning to criticize parents and question family values; decision-making skills were considered inappropriate because right and wrong are absolute; and global education was perceived as an attempt to eliminate patriotism. These are fighting words in the Bible Belt! So, as understanding became clouded, ownership wavered and weakened considerably --- even to the point of loss of continued NASDC funding. Reform is truly a political as well as educational process.

Will the quest continue? Probably --- but most likely as pockets of change instead of systemic reform. Dedicated teachers, parents, and administrators at individual schools remain committed to the Odyssey principles and plan to implement them at their sites. The district has also taken a supportive and nurturing stance. The university partner is moving ahead with the design of alternative teacher preparation programs.

Solutions for educational reform are not easy. The system is complex and hence its reform will also be complex.

Appendix A: Facts About Odyssey Schools

Q. Why were school sites identified before the planning phase was completed?

A. Because teachers, parents and students are required to be involved in helping make decisions about the direction of the project.

Q. What is the curriculum that will be used in the Odyssey schools?

A. It is the same curriculum now being taught in the Gaston County Schools--the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and the current Gaston County Curriculum.

Q. Who will teach in the Odyssey schools?

A. Teachers in the Odyssey schools will be experienced Gaston County teachers. Those currently teaching in the selected sites will be the Odyssey staff unless the~l ~h~P otherwise.

Q. Who developed the Odyssey proposal?

A. The people who wrote the entire proposal are educators from Gaston County who have long careers as teachers and administrators in this school system.

Q. Who is funding the project?

A. Odyssey is funded by the new American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC), whose board of directors includes the CEOs of Exxon, AT&T, B.F. Goodrich, BellSouth and Martin Marietta, to name a few. NASDC is part of President Bush's America 2000 program. It is a private non-profit, tax-exempt organization formed by American business leaders to support the design and establishment of new high performance learning environments that communities can use to transform their schools.

Q. Is the project connected with any other organization?

A. Odyssey is not affiliated with any other program or organization, educational or otherwise.

Q. Where will Odyssey be located?

A. North Gaston, W.C. Friday and Carr are the designated sites for Odyssey. Other Gaston County schools, however, will benefit through staff training and new equipment.

Q. What is Outcomes-Based Education?

A. Outcomes-Based Education identifies the basic skills and knowledge that students should learn. It is based on the belief that all students can learn and be successful. It is a proven educational strategy that has been in practice for more than 20 years. Six North Carolina school systems, funded by the Legislature, are officially using the concept with success and many others are just beginning.

Q. What are some of the teaching strategies that will be used in the three selected schools?

A. The techniques and practices to be used in Odyssey are based on strategies that have proven successful in helping all students learn. Team teaching, a 200 day school year, and multi-age grouping are examples of proven strategies that Odyssey will use to enhance learning for all students.

Q. What about technology in the Odyssey classrooms?

A. The students will learn in high technology classrooms which will prepare them for 21st Century jobs and for life-long learning.

Q. Will students have the traditional grades, class rank, transcripts, and test scores required for college entrance?

A. Yes, In addition, students will have a portfolio containing examples of their academic work.

Q. What kind of learning materials will be used?

A. In addition to textbooks, students will have unprecedented access to computers and software programs. Hookups with state and national libraries are anticipated.

Q. What is the length of the school day?

A. The required school day for students will be 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. However, the schools will be open from 6.30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. This schedule will make it possible to extend time for learning opportunities and may even include before and after school care should parents want this service provided at their school.

Q. What about graduation?

A. There will be graduation ceremonies in June for seniors. There will also be opportunities for some students to graduate early if they choose.

Q. What will the school calendar be?

A. Students will attend school for 4 ten-week terms and will have the option to attend a 5-7 day mini-term or take 3 weeks vacation at the end of each term. The optional mini-term will help students catch up or get ahead with their studies. Traditional holidays will be built into the calendar.

Q. Will students still take achievement tests required by the state?

A. Yes.

Q. Will Vocational Education/Tech Prep be offered?

A. Yes. All students will have access to a range of opportunities including internships and on-the-job work experience.

Q. Will students continue to be eligible for Governor's School?

A. Yes.

Q. Will students who come into the Odyssey program from other schools after the program is in operation be at a disadvantage?

A. No. These students will be placed in appropriate levels of instruction.

Q. What about sports?

A. Odyssey schools will retain their athletic programs and coaches will retain their jobs. Odyssey schools will continue to have the same sports in the same conferences in the same manner. Some of the burdens of managing the sports programs such as collecting gate receipts, providing security for games, and providing field maintenance could possibly be performed by booster clubs or other civic organizations through contractual agreements.

Q. What about band programs?

A. Odyssey schools will retain their band programs and band staff will retain their jobs. Music will continue to be an integral part of both academic and extra-curricular activities.

Q. What about clubs, student government, and senior prom?

A. All of these school activities will continue.

Q. How will student-teacher ratios be changed?

A. The ratios will be improved as compared with current ratios required by the state.

Q. Will there be services for exceptional children?

A. Public Law 94-142 requires that needs of exceptional children be met in an appropriate manner.